

Preface to Diocletian's Price Edict
Translation ©Jacqueline Long

The Emperor Caesar Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletian, dutiful, blessed, unconquered Augustus, chief priest of the Roman state religion, conqueror of the Germans 6 times, conqueror of the Sarmatians 4 times, conqueror of the Persians 2 times, conqueror of the Britons, conqueror of the Carpi, conqueror of the Armenians, conqueror of the Medes, conqueror of the Adiabeni, holding tribunician power for the 18th year, 7 times consul, 18 times acclaimed emperor, Father of our Country, proconsul, and the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximinian, dutiful, blessed, unconquered Augustus, chief priest of the Roman state religion, conqueror of the Germans 5 times, conqueror of the Sarmatians 4 times, conqueror of the Persians 2 times, conqueror of the Britons, conqueror of the Carpi, conqueror of the Armenians, conqueror of the Medes, conqueror of the Adiabeni, holding tribunician power for the 17th year, 6 times consul, 17 times acclaimed emperor, Father of our Country, proconsul, and Flavius Valerius Constantius, conqueror of the Germans 2 times, conqueror of the Sarmatians 2 times, conqueror of the Persians 2 times, conqueror of the Britons, conqueror of the Carpi, conqueror of the Armenians, conqueror of the Medes, conqueror of the Adiabeni, holding tribunician power for the 9th year, 3 times consul, most noble Caesar, and Gaius Valerius Maximinian [II; a.k.a. Galerius], conqueror of the Germans 2 times, conqueror of the Sarmatians 2 times, conqueror of the Persians 2 times, conqueror of the Britons, conqueror of the Carpi, conqueror of the Armenians, conqueror of the Medes, conqueror of the Adiabeni, holding tribunician power for the 9th year, 3 times consul, most noble Caesar - they declare:

We may thank the good fortune of our state, as well as the immortal gods, on remembering the wars we have waged successfully. The condition of the world has been placed, tranquil, in the lap of the deepest quiet and peace towards good men. For this reason we have labored and spent our effort lavishly. Now both Roman dignity and majesty desire that the public honor be arranged faithfully and fittingly adorned. We, who by supernatural forces' benevolent support have suppressed the raging depredations of the past by slaughtering the very peoples of the barbarian tribes, will secure the quiet we have established with the reinforcements Justice deserves. Greed raves and burns and sets no limit on itself. Without regard for the human race, it rushes to increase and augment itself not by years or months or else days, but almost by hours and very moments. If some thought of restraint were curbing its means - or if our shared fortunes could calmly endure this free rein for going wild (it rips them apart, day after day in the worst way with conditions as they are), perhaps a place for pretending it all away and keeping quiet would still seem to remain, since a shared endurance of our spirits would be moderating the detestable enormity and the pitiable state of affairs. But unmastered insanity has one desire: to have no soft spot for a necessity all share. Unprincipled and licentious persons think greed has a certain sort of obligation (greed that swells and roils with rapid fires), in ripping up the fortunes of all, to lose the need rather than the will to continue. They whom the extremes of poverty have forced to perceive their most miserable condition cannot strive farther.

It is appropriate to the forethought of us who are the parents of the human race, that justice intervene in matters as a judge. We purpose that what humanity long hoped for but could not furnish itself may be conferred to the shared good balance of all by the remedies of our foresight. And provision for this particular situation, indeed, as much as everyone's shared consciousness

recognizes and the proof of things themselves cries out, is almost late. We have been devising counsels with this hope or else holding back the remedies we found, so that - as by the laws of nature had to be expected - humanity itself, having been caught in the most serious crimes, might remove its own fault. We thought it far better that the blots of an unendurable plundering be removed from shared judgments by perception and decision of the very people whom the grave injury of blackest inhumanity had handed over as defendants, those enemies of one and all, when they were daily going headlong into worse and by some blindness of their spirits edging towards abomination against the populace.

Toward remedies, therefore, that have long been desired by the necessity of things, we spring into action. We care not for complaints. Unprincipled people perceived our so many years' silence was giving a lesson in restraint but nevertheless refused to comply - not even among them may the intervention of our cure be thought too trivial or too cheap on the grounds it was untimely or superfluous. Who has so insensible a heart or has removed himself so far from human feeling that he can fail to know - that he has not in fact felt in commercial affairs, whether done in trade or dealt with in the cities' daily exchange - to what an extent shameless pricing has spread? Neither abundance of goods nor the bounty of good years tempers this unrestrained lust for stealing! As a result, there is no doubt this sort of men who have experience in these jobs plainly always hang in suspense even concerning the motions of the stars, they try to catch the very breezes and storms, and by their own iniquity they cannot endure that prosperous farmland should be drenched by rains from above, to the hope of future fruits - since they think it their own loss if material plenty is produced by the moderating influences of the very sky. Some people always are eager to turn a profit even on blessings from the gods: they seize the abundance of general prosperity and strangle it. Or again they make much of a year's bad harvest and traffic by the operations of hucksters. Although they each wallow in the greatest riches, with which nations could have been satisfied, they chase after personal allowances and hunt down their chiseling percentages. On their greed, provincial citizens, the logic of our shared humanity urges us to set a limit.

But now we ought to explain also the causes themselves whose necessity finally has forced our long-displayed endurance to take steps. Although it is difficult to unmask the greed raging in the whole world, by special reasoning or rather act, nevertheless our establishment of remedy may be thought more just, since by some description and marks very immoderate men will be forced to recognize the ungoverned desires of their own minds. Therefore, who would not know that effrontery hijacks the public interest? Whatever way everyone's shared security demands our armies be directed, through villages or towns and on every route, effrontery goes to meet them with a spirit of thievery. It ratchets up the prices of things for sale, not fourfold or eightfold but so much that the human tongue's reckoning cannot untangle what to call the accounting and the deed! In sum, meanwhile, by the purchase of one thing a soldier is deprived of his bonus and his salary: he yields to the detestable profits of robbers all the tax the whole world pays to support the armies. By their own hand our soldiers seem to give up the expectation of their own service and the labors they have completed to those who steal from everyone. In this way, day after day, the plunderers of the state itself carry off so much they don't know they have it!

We have been moved by all these things that have been included above, rightly, as we should. Since human feeling itself seems to beg for relief, we have taken the position, not that we must set prices of goods and services for sale - nor indeed would it be thought right, since meanwhile very

many provinces rejoice in the blessing of desired low prices as if by some special condition of abundance - but that we must set a limit. When some expensiveness should arise (the gods forbid it!) the greed that could not be restrained, as if it ranged in fields spread over some limitless expanse, will be choked off by the limits of our statute and the boundaries of a moderating law. Therefore we decree that these prices, which the written text of the subjoined abstract indicates, be kept by the observance of our whole realm: let all understand that license to exceed the same limits has been cut off in advance. As a result, in those places where a profusion of goods should noticeably abound, the benefit of low prices, which is very much the object of our care and foresight, is not hindered while greed, checked in advance, is restrained.

Moreover, this restraint of their shared activity will be obligatory among sellers and buyers whose habit is to go to ports and visit foreign provinces. Since even they themselves know that the statutory prices for goods and services cannot be overstepped in the straits of expensiveness, at the time of sale those places and the journey and the account of the whole transaction will be calculated. In this way the justice of our decree will be conspicuous, that they who do the transporting will not sell more dearly anywhere. Since, therefore, it is agreed that our ancestors too passed legislation for this reason, that effrontery should be repressed by the dread prescribed - because human nature left to its own will turns out altruistic only in absolutely exceptional instances, and dread, as a preceptor, proves to regulate duties most justly - we decree that if anyone should, in his boldness, strive against the form of this statute, he shall undergo a capital penalty. And let not anyone suppose that a hardship is being enacted, since the observance of restraint is present and available as a safe haven for avoiding the penalty. To the same penalty also will be subject that person who from his eagerness to buy colludes with the greed of the seller contrary to the statute. Nor will he be, exceptionally, exempt from injury of this sort who supposes that he ought to hold back necessary kinds of food or service when he has them after the regulation of this statute, since the punishment ought to be even more serious for someone who initiates a scarcity than for someone who brandishes it contrary to the statute.

Therefore we encourage the commitment of all people: let the thing that has been established in law for the public advantage be maintained with well-intentioned compliance and the obligation that is owed, especially since with a statute of this kind it is seen to have been provided not for individual communities and populations and provinces but for the entire world. The people who have senselessly pursued its destruction, it is known, are very few: their greed cannot be softened or sated by an excess either of time or of the wealth they are found to have been so eager to get.